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ABSTRACT

A study conducted a content analysis of seven of the most commonly taught novels in high school English classes to determine whether or not a gender bias existed in them. As each text was examined, a number of questions were asked: (1) Is pejorative language used by the author (or first person narrator) to describe female characters? (2) Are women portrayed as categories or types, i.e., stereotypes of negative traits rather than as complex characters? Are female characters, for example, depicted as either androgynous or as silly little girls in frilly dresses? (3) Are women portrayed as sexual objects? Are they the objects of ridicule or humor? (4) Do the women characters act as a vehicle for the male protagonists' achieving their goals or are women seen as evil or as obstacles to some kind of male dream or goal? (5) If women are missing from the particular novel, are there other more subtle (as in metaphorical) representations of gender bias? Results showed that at a generalized level, the high school canon novels are gender biased in that they deal with male protagonists running to or from something. While there are numerous examples of males paired with other males, there are no female pairs; furthermore, there are few mothers in the novels and older women usually personify the constraints/restraints of society. Women are usually the cause of danger for the questing male protagonists; their sexuality is perilous. Forty-one ancillary study guide materials and seven canon novels are listed. Contains 44 references. (TB)

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READING GENDER BIAS IN THE HIGH SCHOOL CANON NOVELS

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Introduction

The anthropologist Clifford Geertz (1973) has written that, like Max Weber, he perceives man to be "... an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun ..." (p. 5). Geertz explains that "culture is public because meaning is" (p. 12). Who has participated in the construction of knowledge is very important. Those who have participated are those whose interests are served.

The issue of a literature canon is an issue of representation. Textbooks encourage and describe the power arrangements in a society (Anyon 1979, 1981; Sleeter and Grant, 1988; Banks, 1993). This study investigated meaning as constructed by school knowledge. Banks has defined school knowledge as consisting of

> "the facts, concepts, and generalizations presented in textbooks, teachers' guides, and the other forms of media designed for school use. School knowledge also consists of the teacher's mediation and interpretation of that knowledge." (p. 11).

More specifically, this study was concerned with school knowledge evidenced in the novels most frequently taught in American high schools. Arthur Applebee (1989, 1990, 1991, 1992, 1993) and researchers at the National Center on Teaching and Learning at the University of Albany, State University of New York, have found these canon novels as follows:

Of Mice and Men by John Steinbeck is the top novel choice for lower track classes in public and Catholic schools.

The Pearl by John Steinbeck is the most frequently anthologized long fictional work. Six of the seven most widely adopted anthologies include The Pearl at the tenth grade level.

To Kill a Mockingbird by Harper Lee is a top choice for ninth or tenth grade classes. Lee is the only female author of the high school canon novels.

Lord of the Flies by William Golding is generally taught at the twelfth grade level. Golding is the only non American writer in the high school canon novels. Golding is British.

The Great Gatsby by F. Scott Fitzgerald is the third choice for teaching novels in eleventh grade.

The Scarlet Letter by Nathaniel Hawthorne is generally an upper track novel in eleventh grade.

The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn by Mark Twain is an upper track eleventh grade novel in public, Catholic, and independent schools. Catholic and independent schools also use the novel in lower track classes.

The study investigated gender bias in these texts. Bias is broadly defined as the discrepancy between the appearance and the reality, between what is represented as opposed to what actually may be. Bias includes character stereotypes or prototypes, the omission of particular groups of people and the values and perspectives of particular groups of people. Based on writings of Barker (1989), Weixlmann (1988) and Warren (1984), an operational definition is that gender bias exists where female characters are subjugated, terminated or transformed into symbols relevant to the deep moral issue confronting the male protagonist.

Method and Materials

This was a descriptive study. An historical overview of controversy in the teaching of English provided a background. The survey of the pedagogical articles dealing with the high school canon novels suggested possible influences on the particular novel as a school text. References to selected ancillary study guide materials illustrated the kinds of current pedagogy recommended for the particular work. The analytical content analysis of the works delineated the kinds of gender bias in high school canon novels.

Ideally, the study would have included teacher-written units on the novels or departmental objectives for teaching said novels. There is no question that some teachers may be addressing race, class, and gender bias in their literature classes. There is also no question that many English teachers face horrendous schedules of five or six classes, which may include thirty or more students per class. Because of these difficult classroom circumstances, then, teachers may rely on published materials for activities relating to the study of a particular literary work.

The representative ancillary study guide materials included in this study were a sampling ranging from the widely used (and abused) Cliffs Notes Incorporated publications, as well as materials from Holt, Rinehart and Winston or from McDougal Littell Company. Ancillary study guide materials offer prepackaged ideas about a particular novel. These ideas perpetuate and strengthen certain views of race, class, and gender. As such, these ideas are

examples of what sociologists call "legitimation," i.e., what acceptable expectations and norms of gender are being enforced.

The publications of Cliffs Notes Incorporated certainly seem the most gender biased. Hester's sin is that of "passion" rather than "intellect" according to Cliffs Notes on The Scarlet Letter (Dibble, 1988, p. 62). The implication here is the tiresome dichotomy of women as emotional. Men, by contrast, are rational. The message in the Cliffs Notes on Steinbeck's The Pearl is even more blatant where Juana is said to have "determination" and "assertiveness," both of which are unusual in "women of this type" (Fitzwater, 1981, p. 37). Thus, the reader learns that women, especially poor Indian women, are not "determined" or "assertive."

This study used library research in addition to analyzing the content of the primary materials, i.e., the novels themselves and the selected ancillary study guide materials. A majority of the pedagogical articles were taken from the English Journal and other NCTE publications and reports. Pedagogical articles in the English Journal generally reflect contemporary critical approaches to literature. In 1964, for example, Tanner used a formalist approach to explain how tone in The Scarlet Letter reveals complex levels of meaning. But Barker in 1989 takes a feminist approach to interpret Hester as standing apart from the other women in her society.

A number of sources were used for the philosophical, sociocultural, and critical discussions in this study. Scholarly publications in the field of literature

as well as references from the fields of sociology, anthropology, and sociolinguistics were cited.

Procedures

The study used a content analysis to determine the kinds of gender bias evident in each of the seven canon novels. Selected ancillary study guide materials for each of the novels were briefly discussed as to whether the activities address the issue of gender bias. The content analysis of the novels, and the ancillary study guide materials, to extent, used a series of questions to determine the kinds of gender bias embedded in the texts.

This study used the perspective of feminist criticism to show how some so-called universal themes in literature are really white male experiences from white male perspectives. The perspective includes consideration of the social and cultural roles of the women in the canon novels. These roles are determined by looking carefully at how the women characters are coded in the author's language and therefore how these codes would be culturally classified.

Many disciplines deal with the coding of language, more specifically with the coding of language to power one group and subvert another. Lees (1993), for example, in her study of adolescent girls in Britain has written:

> "It is through language that we express and reinforce power relationships and organize our political and institutional systems. It is through language that we make sense of gender relationships" (p. 6).

Bleich (1975) has explained how an affective response (affect) is a very basic feeling which may be accompanied by physiological reactions, e.g., anger

by increased heart rate (p. 11). Bleich (1975) has maintained that these responses are understandable in terms of "associative analogies" (p. 12). An example of such analogies is that of a female student feeling "unclean" or "contaminated" after reading the pig-killing scene in Lord of the Flies (Simmons & Deluzain, 1992, p. 144). Class discussion determines that the feeling comes because the pig killing is analogous to a rape.

Similarly, George Lakoff (1987) has argued that "... emotions have an extremely complex conceptual structure which gives rise to a wide variety of nontrivial references" (p. 380). In defining emotions such as anger or lust, Lakoff has demonstrated that there are numerous expressions used. Most of these are based in a metaphorical conceptual organization (pp. 380-415).

Using as a basis (i.e., language coding, myth and archetypal criticism, and post-structuralist theory), five general questions were constructed to serve as a guide for the content analysis of the study. These questions are as follows:

(1) Is pejorative language used by the author (or first person narrator) to describe the female characters. What kinds of coding is evident in this language?

(2) Are women portrayed as categories or types, i.e., stereotypes of negative traits rather than as complex characters? Are female children, for example, depicted as either androgynous or as silly little girls in frilly dresses?

Are older adult women dreary, hypocritical authority figures?

(3) Are women portrayed as objects? Are women characters the objects of humor or ridicule? Are women sexual objects? Is there, for example, preoccupation with women's bodies as opposed to other attributes? Are men's bodies described as often and in the same way? Are women's bodies subjected to violence?

(4) Do the women characters act as a vehicle for the male protagonists' achieving their goals? Or are women characters seen as evil or as obstacles to some kind of male dream or goal?

(5) If women are missing from the particular novel, are there other more subtle (as in metaphorical) representations of gender bias?

Results

This investigation surveyed the historical background of these high school canon novels. Most of these works entered the high school canon during the 1960s, when teachers and scholars were trying to define English and determine the role of literature in the English curriculum. By the mid-1960s, federally funded Project English Centers included The Scarlet Letter, The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, and The Great Gatsby at least for college

preparatory classes (Santora, 1979, p. 40). During the 1960s, the English Journal featured pedagogical articles such as Josephs (1961) unit on the Puritans where she paired The Scarlet Letter with The Crucible. Scholarly articles by college professors were also featured in the English Journal during this same decade. These critical interpretations of the novels reflected a formalist approach stressing conventions and archetypes. Examples include Harry Morris' (1963) discussion of the "everyman" motif in The Pearl; Veidemanis' (1964) development of Lord of the Flies as man's need to "mature and accept responsibility" (p. 571); and Tanner's (1965) analysis of The Great Gatsby as an improvisation on the story of Christ.

During the early 1970s, the proliferation of elective courses included the canon novels taught in conjunction with more contemporary works. Steinley (1970), for example, wrote about his course on the novella which included The Pearl in conjunction with Lilies of the Field, The Pistol, The Old Man and the Sea, and The Long March. By the 1980s, the structuralist approach was evident in pedagogical articles such as Quick's (1988) application of Barthes' codes to Of Mice and Men. Feminist criticism seemed to enter pedagogy only in relation to The Scarlet Letter, e.g., Barker (1989) and Muldoon (1991). Most of the pedagogical articles designed for the high school teacher seemed to suppress or to justify the gender bias in the canon novels.

This study investigated the generalizations and concepts in these works. References to pedagogical articles and selected ancillary study guide materials

additionally sampled possible "mediation and interpretation" that Banks (1993) has discussed as part of school knowledge (p. 11). Representation in these novels is that of the white Euro/Anglo male. Other groups are presented in negative terms. The African American male, in particular, is portrayed as deformed (Crooks, Tom Robinson) or as humiliated/exploited (Jim).

Representation additionally seems class biased. The "hard work" ethic (To Kill a Mockingbird, The Scarlet Letter) is presented as good. Those who don't work hard (Pap Finn, Bob Ewell) are bad. Yet another class biased idea is the presentation of "good" characters who are "poor but honest" and content with their status. The Cunninghams in To Kill a Mockingbird are examples. By contrast, the desire to increase one's status through material goods is portrayed as dangerous. Jay Gatsby is killed. Kino/Juana lose their child. Class ideology seems evident here, particularly from a Marxian or a poststructuralist perspective.

The focus of this research, however, has been that of gender bias. With the exception of To Kill a Mockingbird, all the high school canon novels have been analyzed from a number of critical perspectives. At a generalized level, the high school canon novels are gender biased in that they deal with male protagonists. The stories are those of the male running to or from something. Jay Gatsby ties to escape his working class background in order to obtain a dream of wealth and status, a dream that he has largely created. George is trying to escape from being a migrant worker to owning a little piece of land.

Kino wants to use the pearl to escape the poverty and illiteracy of being an Indian. Dimmesdale is fleeing the acknowledgement of his indiscretion. Huckleberry Finn runs from the constraints of adult authority. These experiences may not be relevant to females (Morris, 1985; Cox, 1988; Lake, 1988). The male protagonist as "everyman" may not, in fact, represent every woman. The focus on such male characters obligates the female reader to identify cross gender.

The male protagonist is not alone in his flight. Male pairs pervade the canon novels. Nick Carroway tells Jay Gatsby's story and allegedly learns from said story. George's relationship to Lennie seems to border on the sado-masochistic. Dimmesdale and Chillingworth, likewise, may be viewed as perverse. Huck bonds (or merges) with Jim in private, but with Tom Sawyer in public. Piggy and Ralph ally against Roger and Jack. The androgynous Scout is paired with her brother Jem. Even Juana seems an adjunct or an alter ego of Kino.

Yet there are no female bonding pairs in the canon novels. The Widow Douglas and Miss Watson, as other female pairs in The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, are foils or contrasts of ideas. Juana doesn't commiserate with Apolonia. Daisy and Jordan are often together but don't seem close. Nor are there many male/female pairs in the works. Juana seems more like a mirror of Kino than an individual who is sharing in his experience. Daisy and Tom Buchanan are rarely together unless in the company of others. The high school

canon novels, then, are literary discussions of bonding men or boys who are running from some kind of constraints and/or who are confronting some kinds of dangers. In all cases, the constraints or dangers are female.

Older women, i.e., pre- or post menopausal women, usually personify the constraints/restraints of society. Lennie's Aunt Clara both indulges and berates him. Widow Douglas and Miss Watson propel Huck back and forth in their visions of the afterlife. Piggie's "auntie" restricts him because of his asthma but overindulges him in candy. These older women seem to be a contradictory representation of nurturing so often associated with females, particularly mothers.

There are, however, few mothers in the high school canon novels. Daisy's interaction with Pammy is limited. Hester's relationship to Pearl is likewise overshadowed by her needlework, her acts of charity, and her continued interest in Dimmesdale. Juana's concern for Coyotito precipitates the developing tragedy. Most of the mothers in the novels have, in fact, died (Lennie, Huck, Scout and Jem) or "left" (Piggy, Ralph). Thus, the male protagonist and his companion[s] face a dangerous world without the love and/or protection of a mother.

Instead, women are the causes of danger for these boys/men. In the canon novels, women can't be trusted. Juana, for example, tries to throw the pearl back into the sea. Jordan Baker lies. Daisy Buchanan lies (according to Nick). Myrtle Wilson's sister lies. Mayella Ewell lies. Lee's Missionary Society

ladies are colorless hypocrites. Scout, therefore, prefers the world of men. In fact, the only women who are not dangerous are, like Scout, androgynous or, like Miss Maudie, asexual.

Women's sexuality in the high school canon novels is depicted as perilous. Myrtle Wilson interferes with a marriage. Curly's wife threatens George's dream of settling on his own land. Hester/Pearl embody Dimmesdale's sin and, therefore, his reputation as preacher. Sophia Grangerford's elopement escalates the feud. Even the sow in Lord of the Flies has been interpreted as a disruptive presence (Dick, 1987, p. 22) and/or as a dangerous sexual presence (Kinkead-Weekes and Gregor, 1967; Epstein, 1983; Rosenfield, 1983).

The male protagonist, in order to be in control, needs to eliminate this danger. Women, therefore, are subjected to humiliation and/or violence. Myrtle Wilson is punched and run over by an automobile. Curly's wife is likewise "accidentally" murdered. Juana is beaten by her husband. Mayella Ewell is beaten by her father. Scout is attacked while dressed as a ham. Finally, the metaphorical gang rape/murder of Golding's sow seems to sum up the kinds of violence which are enacted upon women.

Yet, with the possible exception of the sow in Lord of the Flies, this violence is rationalized in terms of the phallocentric plots. Fitzgerald portrays Myrtle Wilson as a lowerclass whore whose death is supposed to be accidental. Steinbeck depicts Curly's wife as a sleezy flirt who "asks for trouble" when she

suggests that Lennie stroke her hair. Lee's Mayella Ewell is an outcast who has "no business" trying to seduce Tom Robinson. Kino beats Juana when she tries to throw the pearl away. Then Steinbeck rambles about men and mountains. Thus, the violence upon such women is justified by implication. The women deserve it. The women ask for it.

Pejorative language used in the canon novels, the scholarly interpretations, and the selected ancillary study guide materials perpetuates the ideas of women "deserving and asking for" violence. Myrtle Wilson is described as cheap and vulgar. Curly's wife is called a bitch and a tramp, among other things. Mayella Ewell is "poor white trash."

In addition to violence, women are objects of humiliation and ridicule. Apolonia's fat stomach jiggles on the trips to town. Mayella's secrets are exposed in court. Hester's exposure and public humiliation are the fulcrum of Hawthorne's novel. Aunt Sally is subjected to a series of cruel tricks. Jim is most cruelly exploited when dressed in feminine attire (King Lear costume) or in women's clothes.

In addition to being objects of violence, women characters in the high school canon novels are also objects of ownership. Daisy Buchanan is used by Gatsby as the embodiment of a dream. Daisy is also owned and used by her husband Tom. Tom additionally owns and uses his mistress Myrtle Wilson. Curly's wife is owned by Curly. Juana is owned by her husband Kino. Hester isolates herself from society to be independent, but her isolation and her child

Pearl seem to control Hester, nevertheless. Golding's sow is the quintessential object -- pursued, hunted, violated, murdered.

By contrast, white male subjects are in control. Tom Buchanan, George, Curly, Kino, Tom Sawyer, Jack, and Roger are the brutal purveyors of such exploitation. It is probably too extreme to say that the high school canon novels are a middleclass text of "snuff" pornography. It is probably too extreme to say that the high school canon novels present images of women in bondage. Yet Nick Carroway, Huckleberry Finn, and Ralph, to some extent, seem to be voyeuristic observers for violence enacted upon women. Dimmesdale and Gatsby seem impotent.

Implications

The high school canon novels have been entrenched, then, since at least the 1960s. Early pedagogy reflected formalist and psychoanalytic approaches. More recent articles demonstrate structuralist theories.

Current ancillary study guides evidence a jumble of activities. Some recitation questions are structured like those used in the early 1900s. Some writing activities are vague prompts, perpetuating the practice of writing vague responses. Activities geared to other modes of learning (art, music, etc.) are well-intentioned, but in many cases, relate obliquely to the text. Some "controversial issues" in the various novels are addressed, e.g., Lennie's murder in Of Mice and Men. Gender issues are perpetuated in some cases. In other cases, these gender issues are either ignored or given token consideration.

Censorship attacks, current multicultural debates, and misreadings of cognitive psychology have created confusion for publishers and teachers alike. Superficial readings of the novels are encouraged, rendering the novels activity books. Cultural schemata (Lee, 1993) have been largely ignored in the selection of pedagogy of the canon novels. The "potentially alienating ideology" in the works gas been repressed or rationalized (Weixlmann, p. 277).

Since her 1938 publication of Literature as Exploration (and in subsequent editions), Louise Rosenblatt has written about the importance of literature. She has emphasized how ideas of "complex patterns of behavior, such as courtship, or moral or social attitudes can be assimilated from books" (Rosenblatt, 1983, p. 191). Incessant images of biased themes and stereotypes perpetuate particular world views. Consequently, the influence of what constitutes school knowledge in the canon novels cannot be overestimated.

As Rodden (1991) has pointed out, a canon novel carries major power as required reading for large numbers of adolescents, as a strong economic factor for publishing companies and the copyright owner, and as a subject of scholarly and critical attention. Historically, themes in the canon have been viewed as fixed by prestigious white male critics. The canon itself is established by those who have power, i.e., critics, editors, teachers, and special interest groups. Thus the whole canon question with its particular

pedagogy is a slippery slope.

Gender bias carries strong implications. Stereotypes based on a person's group membership are highly influential in social perception and may determine (1) processing and use of information as well as (2) the course of actions based on the information (Hamilton, Gibbons, Stroessner, & Sherman, 1992). Research such as Cook and Fontaine's (1991) have demonstrated that many adolescent girls experience extreme anxiety about stereotypic gender role characteristics.

Biased school knowledge is particularly insidious in today's institutions, decaying high school facilities which are the settings for abuse, assault, robbery, rape and murder (Staub, 1993; Shor, 1986). The AAUW Executive Summary of How Schools Shortchange Girls (1992) reports that "sexual harassment of girls by boys -- from innuendo to actual assault ... is increasing" (p. 2). Furthermore, the projected majority urban population for the year 2000 is composed of African-Americans, Asian-Americans, Latino/Hispanics, and Native Americans (Jones-Quartey, 1993). A canon of novels dealing primarily with anxious white males in pastoral settings is ill-suited for such a population.

Weixlmann (1988) has written that "... critics are likely to defend canonical works that contain incidents of brutality, of bigotry, of racial, sexual, or national chauvinism" (p. 277). Ignoring the bias in canon works confirms the power and values of privileged classes and individuals.

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